

YELLOW SULPHUR SPRINGS
(Yellow Springs)
(Taylor's Springs)
3145 Yellow Sulphur Road
Christiansburg
Montgomery County
Virginia

HALS VA-55
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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YELLOW SULPHUR SPRINGS (Taylor's Springs)

HALS NO. VA-55

Location: 3145 Yellow Sulphur Road, Christiansburg, Montgomery County, Virginia

Lat: 37.178133 Long: -80.397814 (Center of Yellow Sulphur Springs Inn, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).

Significance: Long associated with white privilege, the Virginia mineral springs resorts have been identified by historian Charlene Lewis as playing a key role in shaping elite southern society throughout the south - the place where in antebellum Virginia "each Summer, more elite whites congregated...than anywhere else in the south...." Among the Virginia springs frequented by elite whites during the antebellum and post-Civil War periods was Yellow Sulphur Springs located in Montgomery County near Christiansburg. Originally developed in the first decade of the nineteenth century by Charles Taylor as Taylor's Springs, later known as Yellow Springs, the spa featured a two story hotel and springs on 160 acres. Yellow Springs became one of the stops on the nineteenth century spring's circuit that extended throughout the western part of present day Virginia and into eastern West Virginia.

Additional acreage and expanded accommodations, including cottage rows, were added by Armistead W. Forrest, who purchased the Springs in 1842. Renamed Yellow Sulphur Springs in 1853, the spring complex would eventually include a second hotel, individual cottages, a bowling alley, and ponds in addition to the original hotel and spring.

Following the Civil War the Virginia Springs were frequented by many former Confederate officers. Among the spring's most famous patrons was former Confederate General, Jubal Early who made Yellow Sulphur his "summer home" following the Civil War. Yellow Sulphur would pass through various owners until its supposed demise in 1923 when most histories note that the Yellow Sulphur Springs "closed for good."

However, black Virginians began to frequent a select group of mineral springs that catered specifically to African Americans in the late nineteenth century. The development and popularity of these early black springs set the stage for the purchase in 1926 of Yellow Sulphur Springs by Yellow Sulphur Springs, Inc. a company formed by 10 prominent black businessmen from nearby Roanoke, Virginia. The resort served the African American community for the next few years until it was sold on the Montgomery County Courthouse steps in the spring of 1929.

Description: Today considerable evidence of Yellow Sulphur Springs' development remains. The spring house is in excellent condition and the original sulphur spring is still flowing. The original Hotel is still standing although it has suffered the ravages of time. The hotel's long, second story front gallery remains and the hotel's basic interior configuration is intact. However, its furnishings and many of its fine details have long since been removed. Sadly, the floor of the south wing has collapsed and the ground floor suffers greatly from water damage. Three of the Springs "Rows" remain. The Spring House Row has been stabilized and partially renovated by the Spring's current owners. The Memphis Row to the east has not fared as well. Damage from a leaky roof is evident and the work is need to stop is slow decline. The Petersburg Row remains but it is in poor condition and would require a major reconstruction to bring back its structural integrity. Near the south Row is the last of the Spring's original cottages also in poor condition. The old bowling alley, located north of the hotel has collapsed within the last 10 years. Its siding still shows the evidence of carved notes from spring visitors. A second hotel built in the nineteenth century burned not long after opening although some of its footings and foundation walls. Additional Rows and the spring's supporting structures including additional cottages, barns, carriage houses, an ice house and kitchen are no longer standing and their exact locations have yet to be verified. Behind the hotel are the old superintendent's cottage, now used as the spa offices, and two new structures that are used to serve the Spa's current clientele.

Most important is the continued integrity of the Springs' unique topographic setting at the confluence of two streams. And today the Spring landscape, so effectively captured in Beyers 1858 lithograph, is still legible. The entry drive still curves through a grove of native trees including several large oaks from the Spring's heyday before crossing the stream as it approaches the hotel and spring house. Cut into the slopes above the stream are the benches where the now demolished rows, cottages, and supporting structures once stood. Behind the hotel is the depression identifying the location of the icehouse. Below the bowling alley is the basin of the old pond, its dam breached by the still flowing stream. The basin of the pond featured so prominently in Beyer's lithograph also remains.

History: **The Emergence of Black Springs:**

Given the long association between the Virginia mineral springs and elite white Society, it might seem odd that Virginia's black citizens would gravitate to the springs. However, in Virginia, as elsewhere in the South, the development and day-to-day operation of the white springs was dependent upon the labor of slaves and free blacks. At some of the springs, the resort's black community included "local free black families" and that "the large resorts such as White Sulphur and Fauquier White Sulphur, there were communities made up of hundreds of black men, women and children" (Lewis 2001, p. 43). In addition, many of the spring's patrons traveled with servants. The White Sulphur springs had a small gallery for blacks in its theater and some resorts had separate springs 'where negro servants

assemble and drink in imitation of their masters” (Lewis 2001, p. 197). Throughout the antebellum period “resort slaves and slave visitors had experiences at the springs that were separate from, but often similar to, those of fashionable white society” (Lewis 2001, p. 197).

As a result, as white visitors to the springs met and socialized with their peers from throughout the South, slaves and free blacks at the springs “met black men and women from across the South, expanding their knowledge of others and their ties outside of their locality” (Lewis 2001, p. 45). Collectively then, over time the Virginia mineral springs were woven into the discourse of African American history, community life, and the black experience of the Virginia landscape. It is not surprising then that many of the state’s African American citizens would gravitate to those springs that were, during the era’s of Jim Crow and segregation, transformed to serve as black gathering places.

It was in this cultural and historic context then that black Virginians in the late nineteenth century began to frequent a select group of mineral springs that catered specifically to African Americans. Documenting the African American ownership and presence at these springs, however, and understanding of the important role the springs played as African American resorts and gathering places has remained elusive, requiring new and untapped sources of evidence, most importantly Virginia’s black press. Among those springs that advertised in the Commonwealth’s black newspapers were Colemanville Mineral Springs in Cumberland County, Otterburn Lithia Springs in Amelia County, Bothwell Springs, and Silcott Springs in Fauquier County. During this period, advertisements also appeared in the black press for two springs long associated with white elites: Fauquier White Sulphur Springs, and Sweet Chalybeate Springs in Alleghany County’s Sweet Springs Valley.

In 1893 a “Sweet Chalybeate Letter” published in the Richmond Planet described Sweet Chalybeate Springs as:

“the paradise of Virginia Resorts....its white cottages, broad lawns, green meadows, and giant shade trees stand ever ready to greet the dust worn traveler from the white city or the fleeing yellow jacket refugees, from the land of sugar cane and corn. Here all is quiet.”

The “Sweet Chalybeate Letter” revealed the widespread attraction of the springs within in the African American community - noting visitors from Norfolk, Alexandria, Richmond, Lexington, Charlottesville, and Albemarle, Co. in Virginia as well as guests from Chicago, Columbus, Ohio, Washington, D.C., and Alderson and Union, West Virginia.

Cultural Importance: Yellow Sulphur Springs: “America’s Greatest Colored Resort”

The ownership and exclusivity of these springs as black resorts during this period

is not clear from the extant record. The development and popularity of these early black springs, however, set the stage for the purchase in 1926 of Yellow Sulphur Springs by Yellow Sulphur Springs, Inc. a company formed by 10 black businessmen from nearby Roanoke, Virginia. The purchase of the spring was characterized in the Journal and Guide as heralding “a new epoch in the history of the colored people” a place “where the air is pure and invigorating with an environment where race prejudice is not likely to arise.”

The springs new owners were a remarkable cross section of black Roanoke and collectively embodied the entrepreneurial spirit, economic energy, and self reliance that permeated black Roanoke during the era of segregation.

The owners included:

C.W. Poindexter, P.R. Cowan, J. L. Reid, Albert F. Brooks, owner of A.F. Brooks Realty, William H. Burwell, President of the Magic City Building and Loan Association and a former railroad brakeman, Henry C. Johnson, Secretary/Treasurer of the Magic City Building and Loan Association and manager of the Richmond Beneficial Insurance Company, C.W. Thompson, a railroad porter, Alvin L. Coleman, the chief bellman at the Hotel Roanoke, C. Tiffany Tolliver, owner of Roanoke’s Ideal Café, President of the city’s Strand Theater, and former partner of pioneering black filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux, and William B.F. Crowell, the Secretary of the Central Credit Union, Grand Chancellor of the Roanoke Chapter of the Knights of Pythias and an actor in several Oscar Micheaux films. Crowell was also, along with Brooks and Tolliver, co-owner of the Hampton Hotel and the Hampton Theater both located on Henry Street, the city’s black main street.

The group’s close connections to Henry Street illustrates the growth and development during this period of “black-owned insurance companies, banks, real estate companies, retail outlets....grocery stores, pharmacies, barbershops, and other service providers [that] created downtown business districts that stabilized black communities. The black press frequently covered the various business ventures of the spring’s owners and their participation in various social organizations.

Advertisements for Yellow Sulphur Springs appeared in the Journal and Guide throughout the summer of 1926 billing the spring as “America’s Greatest Colored Resort” with easy train connections on the Norfolk and Western rail line to cities throughout the state. For the next two years the black press covered the social experiences at the spring and over time employment at the spring would be a noted in stories and obituaries of former spring employees.

Despite the diverse business experience of Yellow Sulphur Spring’s black owners, the success of the resort was short-lived. While the reason for its demise is uncertain, Yellow Sulphur Springs was sold on the Montgomery County Courthouse steps in the spring of 1929.

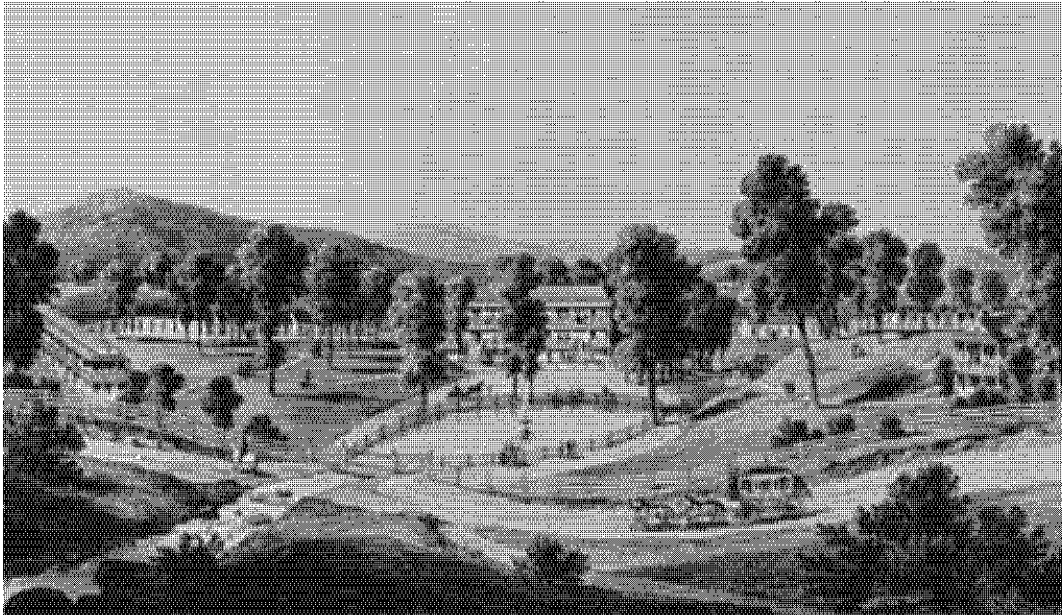
Today, the spring continues as a healing arts studio and spa. Its importance as a “America’s Greatest Colored Resort” is being documented through on-going scholarship focused on stories and advertisements in Virginia’s period black press. The next phase of research will include oral histories with those who remember the stories of this remarkable and hidden treasure from Virginia’s segregated landscape of recreation.

- Sources:
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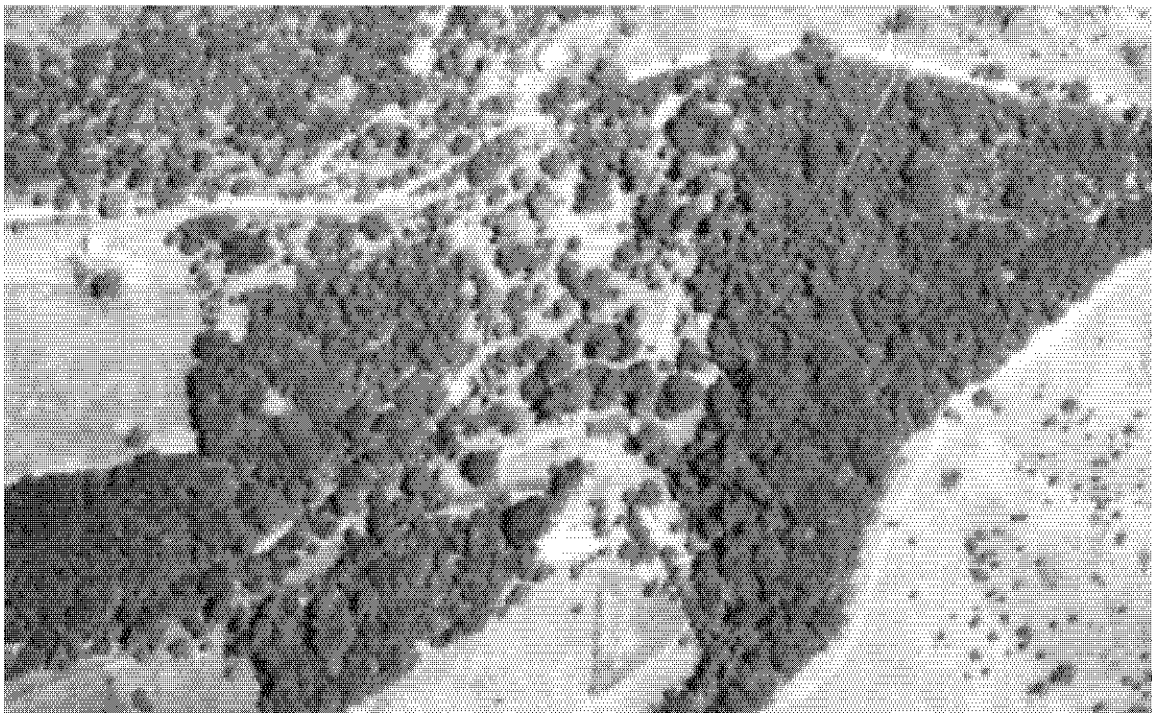
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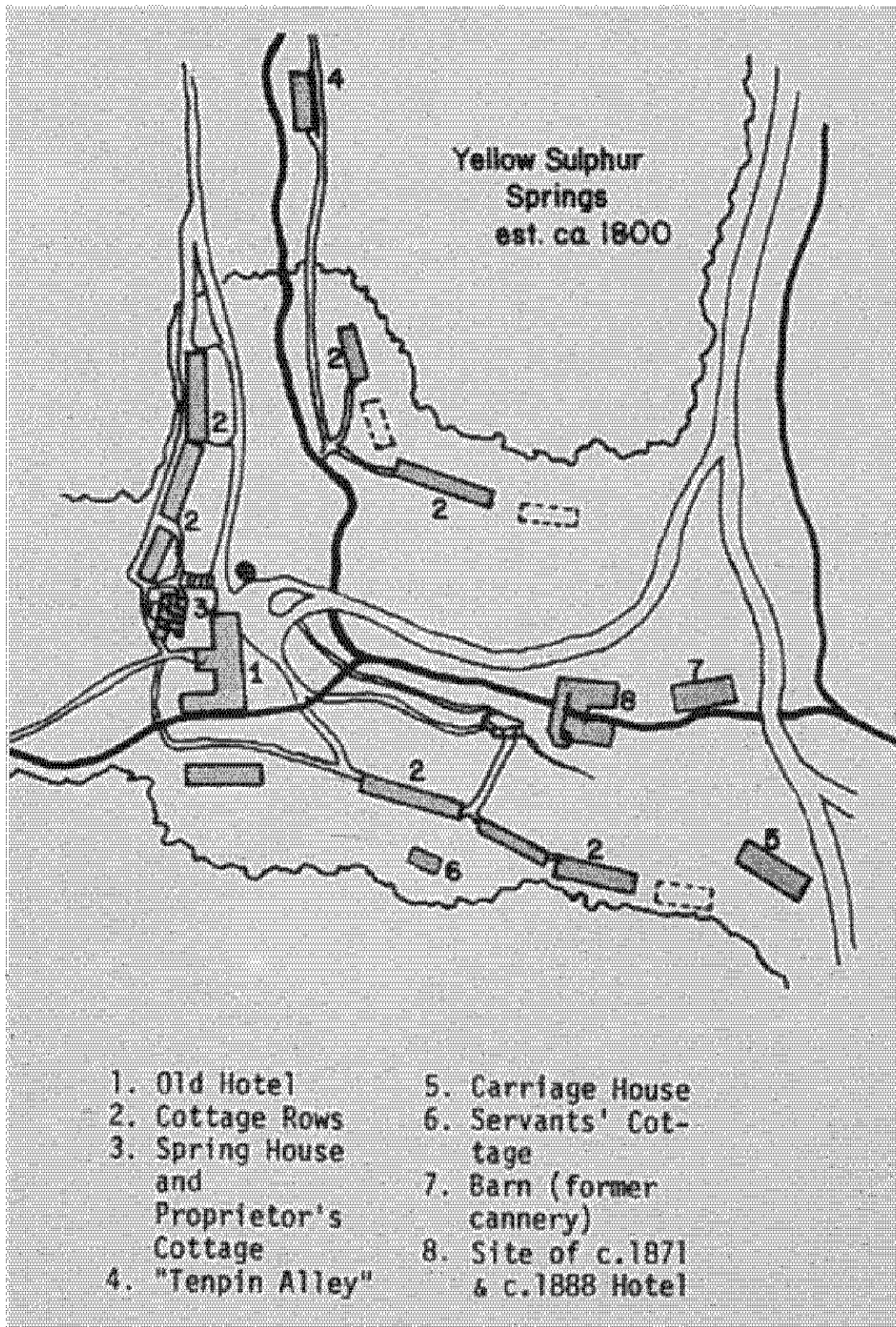
July 22, 2011.



Edward Beyer's lithograph of Yellow Sulphur Springs, Circa 1858.



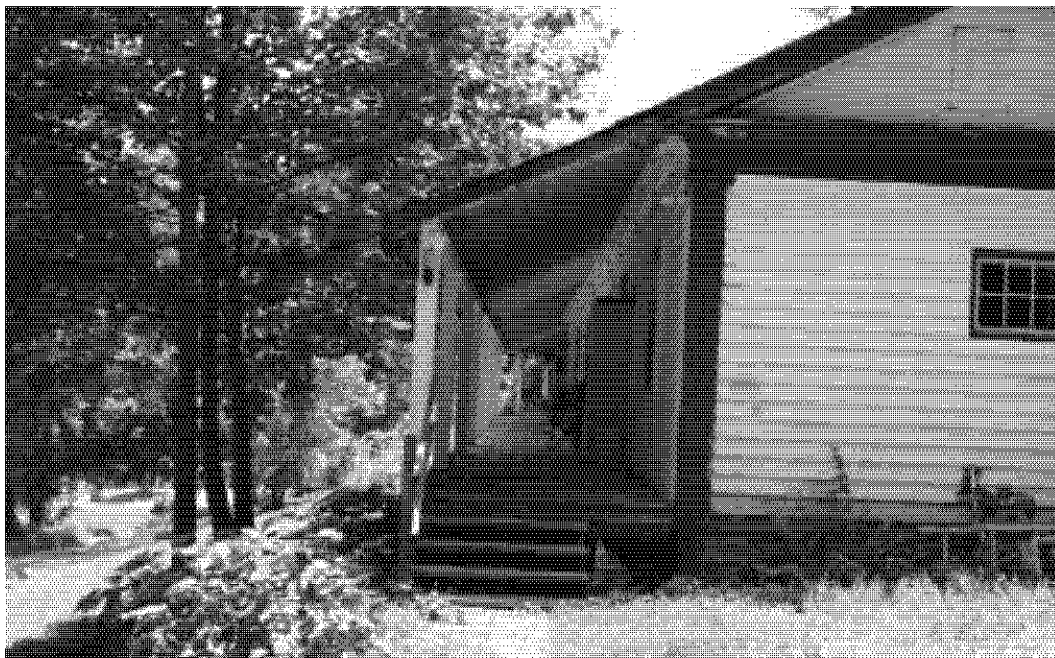
Yellow Sulphur Springs Aerial Photo (Montgomery County USDA Service Center, October 8, 1953).



Plan of Yellow Sulphur Springs, 1992 (Delineated by Allison Rani Moore, 5th Year Capstone Project, Landscape Architecture Program, Virginia Tech University).



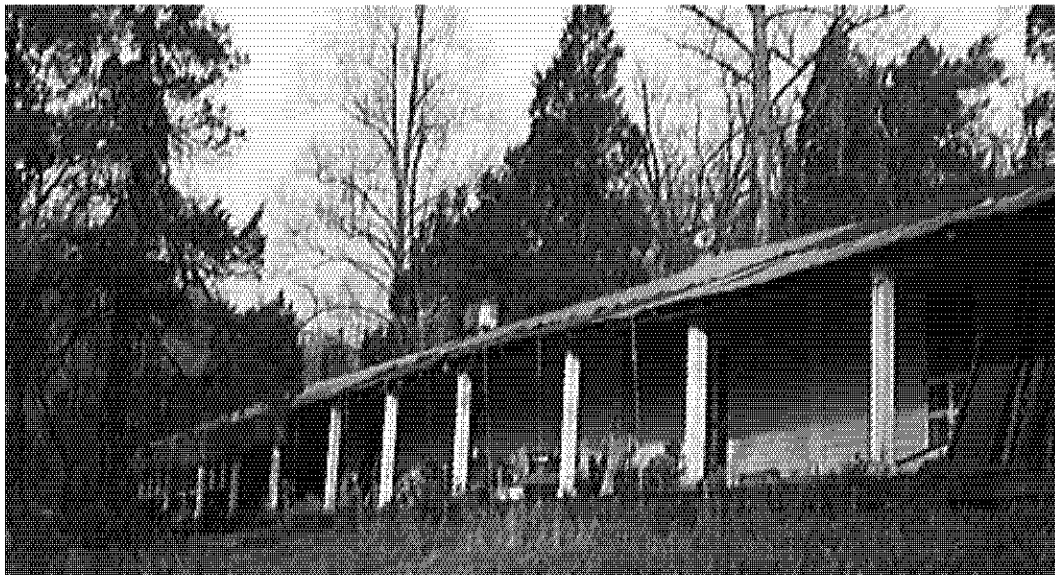
Yellow Sulphur Springs entry road and hotel (Brian Katen, 2011).



Spring House Row at Yellow Sulphur Springs (C.L. Bohannon, 2011).



Hotel at Yellow Sulphur Springs (C.L. Bohannon, 2011).



Memphis Row at Yellow Sulphur Springs (Brian Katen, 2011).